Agricultural Experiment Station • Cooperative Extension Service

Editing and Proofreading

by Frank Sholedice, Assistant Editor

Editing is much more than checking a document for typos and grammatical errors. Editing helps a document achieve clarity, accuracy, and the best content, organization, and design possible for its intended audience. If a document is poorly organized, if information is missing or incomplete, or if there are errors, the document will not achieve its purpose and readers will lose out.

When you edit a document, pretend that you are a reader from your intended audience and approach the document from the reader's perspective (with their knowledge level, background, skills, and expectations). If you think a potential reader may have trouble with a certain sentence or section, it's a good indication that changes are needed.

There are several types of editing, each with its own purpose.

Although you may revise, edit, and proofread as you write a document, you should always budget time just for editing at several points in the writing process.

Substantive editing

Substantive editing looks at the "big picture"—the organization, content, and overall function of the document. This type of editing is usually done early in the writing process—after the first or second draft—to avoid big changes later on.

Copyediting

Copyediting looks at spelling, punctuation, grammar, consistency (in usage, formatting, style), accuracy, and completeness. This type of editing should be done as the document nears completion.

Proofreading

Proofreading is performed just before the document is printed or distributed, and is usually the last step in the writing and editing process. It is a final check of all elements in a document. Proofreading changes should be minor and should focus on glaring mistakes rather than writing/editing choices that were made earlier in the project.

Writers can become too involved in a project to be able to spot even the most obvious errors. It is always a good idea to have another person look over your document, even if he or she isn't an "editor." If you have to edit all by yourself, though, it's best if you're able to take a break from the project—especially for a couple of days—and approach it with fresh eyes when it comes time to edit.